

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service



News Release

*Great Lakes - Big Rivers Region
External Affairs Office*

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 11, 2006
EA 06 - 37**

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Releases Final Environmental Impact Statement and Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today, released the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge which will guide management and administration of the 240,000-acre, multi-state refuge for the next 15 years.

The preferred alternative in the EIS, Alternative E: Modified Wildlife and Integrated Public Use Focus, seeks to balance the needs of fish and wildlife with the needs of the public for recreation. All current public uses on the refuge will continue, although the plan outlines several areas or zones where means of access and use would be affected.

Alternative E outlines a broad range of actions to improve habitat for fish and wildlife, complete land acquisition within the refuge, address water quality issues, provide more effective rest areas for waterfowl and other birds, provide high quality wildlife-dependent recreation, and balance the needs of various user groups.

The preferred alternative was developed after evaluating input and comments from the public. Since August 2002, the refuge has hosted 46 public meetings and workshops attended by 4,500 people from river communities in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa and Illinois. Refuge staff has also had numerous meetings with the states' conservation agencies, the Army Corps of Engineers and several conservation and sporting groups. The refuge also received and considered 3,230 written comments to management alternatives contained in draft plans.

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“All the comments we received, both written and verbal, reflected an amazing diversity of viewpoints,” said Refuge Manager Don Hultman. “It’s obvious citizens love the Upper Mississippi River, and that passion bodes well for the future of the refuge, the river, and the fish and wildlife that call it home.”

Hultman said the preferred alternative strikes the best balance between the needs of wildlife and the needs of the people. “I believe we have been responsive to the public, but also know that it is perhaps impossible to please everyone on a refuge of this size and scope,” he said.

The most contentious aspects of the plan have been proposed changes to areas closed to waterfowl hunting which provide a series of stepping-stone sanctuaries for waterfowl during fall migration; establishment of electric motor and seasonal slow, no wake areas to reduce disturbance to wildlife and address conflicts between user groups; and, the phase-out of permanent waterfowl hunting blinds or structures which have evolved to proprietary use of a public refuge.

“These are difficult issues and some represent significant change for many people, but we believe the plan is necessary to meet the resource purposes for which the refuge was established while meeting the needs of a diverse public which enjoys the refuge in many ways,” Hultman said.

He said the preferred alternative plan in the Final EIS, in response to public and agency comment, reflects numerous changes from both the draft released in May 2005 and the draft Alternative E released as an EIS supplement in December 2005.

Implementing the preferred alternative will cost an estimated \$228 million over 15 years, with 78 percent, or \$177 million, directly related to habitat improvement through enhancement projects and completing land acquisition within the refuge boundary.

Significant changes reflected in Alternative E in the Final EIS include:

- Changes to locations and boundaries of several proposed Waterfowl Hunting Closed Areas, with slightly less acreage overall than the current system established in 1958.
- Dropping the “no fishing, no motors” provision for Closed Areas in favor of Voluntary Avoidance for large areas and No Motors and Voluntary Avoidance for small areas, with restrictions taking effect October 15 -- versus October 1 -- each year to extend fall fishing.
- Dropping the 25 shotshell daily limit and 100 yard spacing regulations for waterfowl hunting.

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- Dropping the fee managed hunt proposal for the Gibbs Lake Area of Lake Onalaska in Pool 7 in favor of devising a plan with waterfowlers.
- Reducing the number of Electric Motor Areas from 17 to 5; but designating eight Slow, No Wake Areas where from March 16 to October 31 watercraft must go slow and airboats or hovercraft operation is prohibited. These designated areas collectively cover about eight percent of the water area of the refuge.
- Dropping the restrictions on areas open to camping and new alcohol and human waste regulations, but adding a new regulation prohibiting glass containers when afoot on refuge lands.
- Dropping the proposal for a launch fee at Refuge-administered boat ramps.
- Opening an additional 678 acres to hunting to help hunters displaced by changes to the Waterfowl Hunting Closed Area in Pool 4, and delaying implementation to 2009 to allow time to gather more information about bird use in the Nelson-Trevino area.
- Delaying implementation of the Black River Bottoms Slow, No Wake Area in Pool 7 until 2008 to allow more time to explore an alternative area proposed by the public.
- Dropping the proposed Goose Island Special Hunt Area (235 acres) in Pool 8.
- Reducing the size of the Reno Bottoms Slow, No Wake Area in Pool 9 by 866 acres.
- Simplifying the paired waterfowl hunting closed areas in Pool 10 by reducing the size of the north area (McGregor Lake) by 500 acres and making it a standard closed area, and making the Wisconsin River Delta a Special Hunt Area (no hunting or trapping November 1 to end of duck season only) versus a closed area.
- Designating only about five miles of river in Pool 11 (Grant County, Wis.) as “no open water waterfowl hunting” versus all refuge areas in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The next step in the planning process is a decision by the Regional Director, Midwest Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Fort Snelling, Minn. on which alternative in the Final EIS will become the final management plan for the refuge. This decision is made after a required 30-day minimum waiting period and recorded in a formal Record of Decision. A decision is expected in late August.

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Hultman said no public meetings will be held, although the public or agencies may provide information or comment during the waiting period.

The Final EIS and CCP or the Summary of Major Changes to Alternative E can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/planning/uppermiss>. The summary is also being mailed directly to the approximately 5,000 people who signed up to receive information about the CCP.

The documents can also be viewed at 58 public libraries in communities near the refuge, or at refuge district offices in Savanna, Ill.; McGregor, Iowa; La Crosse, Wis.; and Winona, Minn. To receive a copy of the summary of changes or for help in locating a library or office, persons may call the refuge at (507) 452-4232, or leave a message at the toll-free number (888) 291-5719.

With an estimated 3.7 million annual visits, the "Upper Miss" refuge is the most visited in the U.S., exceeding levels at most national parks. It also has the added complexity of a major navigation system, including 11 locks and dams within its boundary. It is also a world-class fish and wildlife area which harbors 306 species of birds; 119 species of fish; more than 160 active bald eagle nests; thousands of heron and egret nests; spectacular concentrations of canvasback ducks, tundra swans, and white pelicans; and several threatened or endangered species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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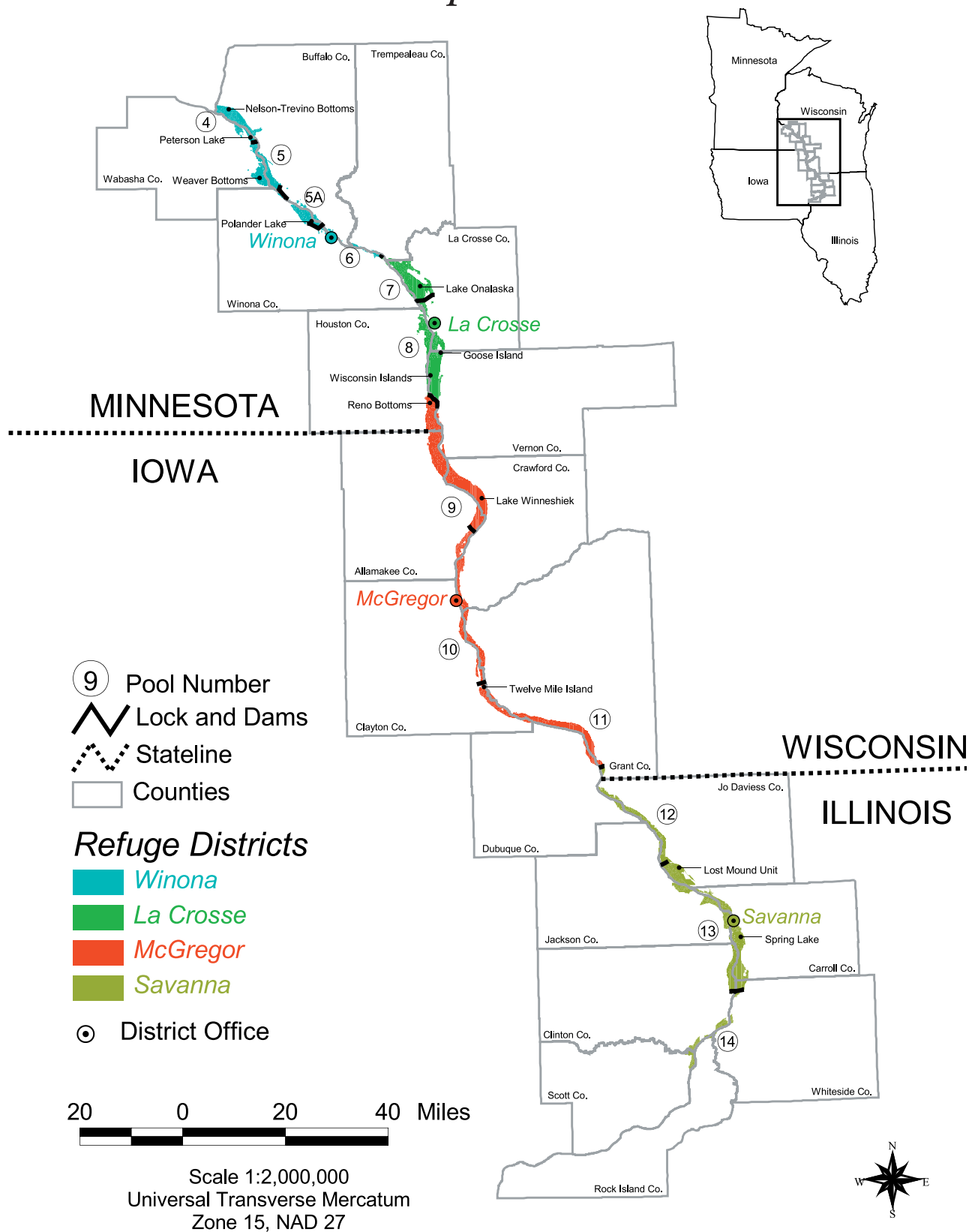


U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Upper Mississippi River

National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

General Map





U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Upper Mississippi River *National Wildlife and Fish Refuge*

Quick Facts

Refuge Facts

- Established: 1924
- Acres: 240,220
- Refuge covers 261 miles of Mississippi River Valley from Wabasha, Minn., to Rock Island, Ill., and is divided into four districts:
 - Winona, MN (Pools 4-6)
 - La Crosse, WI (Pools 7-8)
 - McGregor, IA (Pools 9-11)
 - Savanna, IL (Pools 12-14)
- The refuge includes land in 19 counties across four states (MN, WI, IA, and IL)

Financial Impact

- Thirty-seven person permanent staff
- 3.7 million visitors annually (refuge-wide)
- FY 2006 budget: \$3.9 million (refuge-wide)
- Mississippi River annually contributes an estimated \$1 billion in recreational benefits to the region
- Refuge visitation generates nearly \$90 million per year in economic output
- Visitation to refuge plus visits to adjacent counties generates \$255 million

Geopolitical Setting

- Established in 1924 by Act of Congress as refuge and breeding place for:
 - migratory birds; other wild birds, game animals, furbearers;
 - fish and other aquatic life; and,
 - the conservation of wildflowers and aquatic plants
- Represented in Congress by eight senators and six representatives
- Major navigation corridor through the refuge
- Eleven locks and dams within boundary creating navigation pools
- Seventy adjacent communities
- National Scenic Byways running along both sides its entire length

Biological Values

- More than 600 species of plants
- 48,000 acres of marsh habitat
- 51,000 acres of floodplain forest
- 5,700 acres of grassland including rare native prairie
- 40 percent of waterfowl in U.S. use the Mississippi Flyway
- 50 percent of the world's canvas-back ducks stage on the refuge
- 20 percent of the eastern population of tundra swans stage on the refuge
- 167 bald eagle nests; 2,700 peak population during spring migration
- 5,000 great blue heron and common egret nests in 15 colonies
- 119 species of fish
- 42 species of mussels
- 31 species of reptiles (19 snakes, 1 lizard, 11 turtles)
- 14 species of amphibians



Public Use Opportunities

- Hunting and fishing
- Wildlife observation
- Wildlife Interpretation
- Boating and camping
- 275,000 visits for waterfowl hunting
- One million visits for fishing (all seasons popular)
- 300,000 visits for wildlife observation, interpretation, and environmental education
- 1.3 million annual visits for water and beach-related activities

Contacting the Refuge

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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Upper Mississippi River

National Wildlife and Fish Refuge

Major Changes to Final Environmental Impact Statement/ Comprehensive Conservation Plan Alternative E

■ In Pool 4, Waterfowl Hunting Closed Area, open additional 678 acres to hunting to help displaced hunters and delay implementation *until 2009* to allow time to gather more information about bird use in Nelson-Trevino area.

■ In Pool 7, delay implementation of Black River Bottoms Slow, No Wake Area *until 2008* to allow more time to explore alternative area proposed by public.

■ In Pool 9, delete 866 acres of the Reno Bottoms Slow, No Wake Area as suggested by the public.

■ Open water hunting: Designate only about 5 miles of river in Pool 11 versus all waters in Minnesota and Wisconsin where state regulations will still apply.

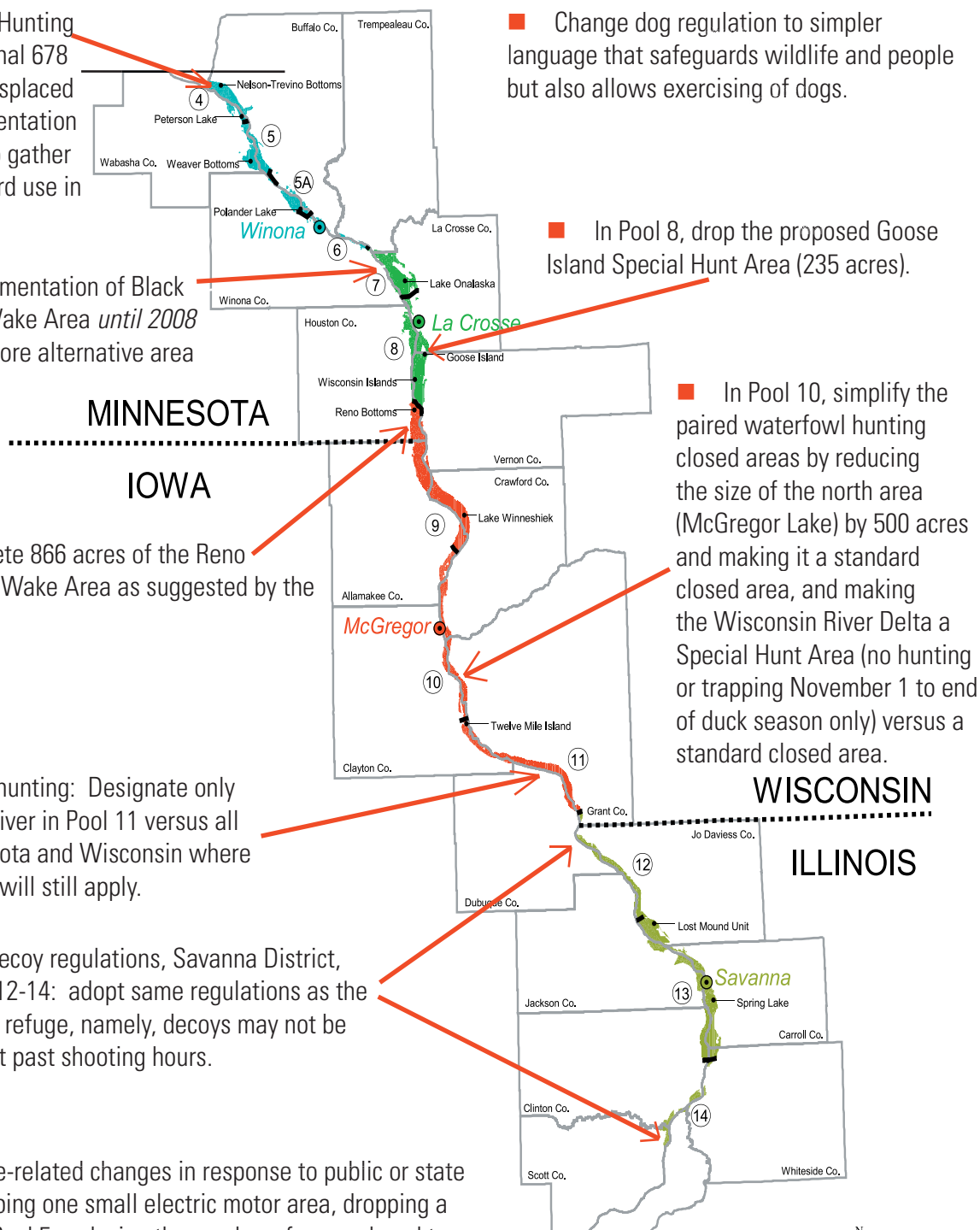
■ Decoy regulations, Savanna District, Pools 12-14: adopt same regulations as the rest of refuge, namely, decoys may not be left out past shooting hours.

■ Nine lesser public use-related changes in response to public or state comments, including dropping one small electric motor area, dropping a closed area expansion in Pool 5, reducing the number of acres closed to hunting around trails, and adding travel corridors to closed areas.

■ Change dog regulation to simpler language that safeguards wildlife and people but also allows exercising of dogs.

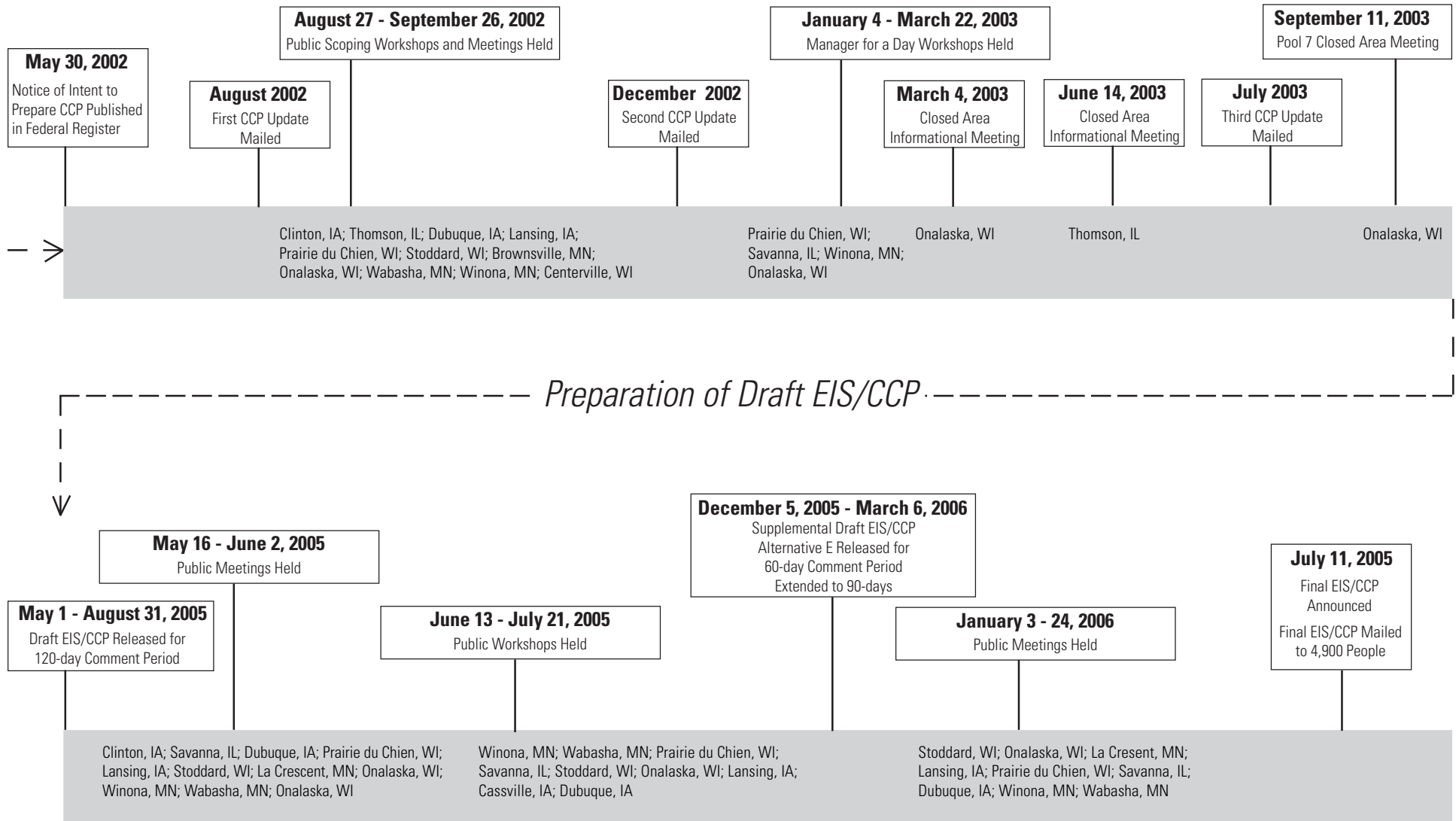
■ In Pool 8, drop the proposed Goose Island Special Hunt Area (235 acres).

■ In Pool 10, simplify the paired waterfowl hunting closed areas by reducing the size of the north area (McGregor Lake) by 500 acres and making it a standard closed area, and making the Wisconsin River Delta a Special Hunt Area (no hunting or trapping November 1 to end of duck season only) versus a standard closed area.





Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan Public Involvement Timeline



Alternative E: Modified Wildlife and Integrated Public Use Focus (Preferred Alternative)

Increase level of effort on fish and wildlife and habitat management. Take a proactive but balanced approach to public use management to ensure a diversity of opportunities for a broad spectrum of users, both for wildlife-dependent uses and traditional and appropriate non-wildlife-dependent uses.

Alternative E Summary

Boundary issues would be aggressively addressed and areas with greatest encroachment problems would be surveyed in cooperation with the Corps of Engineers. The rate of land acquisition would increase within the approved boundary to complete 58 percent of the total, an average of 1,000 acres per year. There would be more effort to protect through easements or fee-title acquisition all bluffland areas identified in the 1987 Master Plan, and an increase in oversight and administration of Research Natural Areas. The Refuge would be nominated as a Wetland of International Importance (Ramsar). Guiding principles for habitat projects would be established and would stress an integrated approach.

There would be an increase in effort to achieve continuous improvement in the quality of water flowing through the Refuge, including decreasing sedimentation. Pool-scale drawdowns would be accomplished by working with the Corps of Engineers and the states. The control of invasive plant species would increase, and there would be increased emphasis on the control of invasive animals. Environmental Pool Plans would be implemented on a strategic and opportunistic basis using the Environmental Management Program or other programs and funding sources. Wildlife inventory and monitoring would increase and include more species groups beyond the current focus of waterfowl, colonial nesting birds, eagles,



Mallard pair: Stan Bousson

sensitive marsh birds, frogs and toads, and aquatic invertebrates/vegetation. The management of threatened and endangered species, including state-listed species, would focus on helping population recovery, not just protection. The furbearer trapping program would continue but be brought into compliance with policies by writing a new plan. The Refuge would become much more active in fishery and mussel management, and provide more input to the states on commercial fishing. Knowledge of turtle ecology through research would increase, as would turtle conservation efforts in cooperation with the states and Corps of Engineers. A forest inventory on the Refuge would be completed in cooperation with the Corps of Engineers, and a forest management plan prepared, leading to more active forest management. The 5,700 acres of grassland habitat on the Refuge would be maintained and enhanced using fire and other tools, and the Refuge would look at increasing grassland areas where appropriate due to its importance to grassland birds and other species.

There would be a continuation of hunting and fishing opportunities on a large percentage of the Refuge. The system of waterfowl hunting closed areas would change with some eliminated, some reduced in size, and several new areas added for a total of 20 closed areas and three sanctuaries. The public would be asked to practice Voluntary Avoidance in all closed areas from October 15 to the end

of the respective state duck hunting season, and no motorized watercraft would be permitted in eight small closed areas during the same time period. The firing line issue north of the closed area in Lake Onalaska (Gibbs Lake area) would be addressed by completing a management plan in collaboration with waterfowl hunters and the State of Wisconsin. There would be no new shotshell possession limit or spacing requirement between parties for waterfowl hunters, and the 200-yard hunting party spacing for the Illinois side of the Refuge in Pools 12-14 would remain in place. There would be a provision for no open water waterfowl hunting in a portion of Pool 11, Grant County, Wisconsin, approximate river miles 586-592. In the Savanna District (Pools 12-14), permanent blinds for waterfowl hunting would be eliminated, including the Potter's Marsh and Blanding Landing areas, and leaving decoy sets out overnight will not be allowed. The Potter's Marsh managed hunt would continue with administrative changes to promote fairness and efficiency. The Blanding Landing managed hunt would be eliminated, but the area would remain open to hunting. General fishing would continue to be promoted, and the Refuge would provide some oversight on fishing tournaments in collaboration with the states and other agencies.

There would be an increase in facilities and programming for wildlife observation, photography, interpretation and environmental education. There would be a modest increase in Refuge access through new facilities and improvement of existing boat ramps, pull offs, and overlooks. There would be no launch fee on Refuge-operated boat ramps. New standards for the commercial fish floats or piers below locks and dams 6, 7, 8, and 9 would be developed and implemented, and any floats phased out for noncompliance may be replaced based on a review of new proposals. A consistent process for issuing permits for commercial guiding on the Refuge would be implemented in cooperation with the states. Areas open to beach-related public use (camping, swimming, picnicking, social gatherings) would remain the same, although some new or modified regulations would be adopted. A beach management and maintenance policy would be established and the Refuge would work with the Corps of Engineers, states and the public to complete beach management plans for each river pool. The Refuge would explore a user fee to help defray costs of managing beach-related uses, although none is planned at this time. Any new fee proposals would be developed in coordination with other agencies and the public. A total of five Electric Motor Areas (1,852 acres) and eight Slow, No Wake Areas (9,720 acres) would be established, along with 14 new slow, no-wake zones. Current regulations on the use of dogs would be changed to allow dogs to be exercised under certain conditions. General public use regulations would be reviewed annually and changed as needed, and the Refuge would complete a step-down Law Enforcement Plan in coordination with the states and Corps of Engineers.

New offices and maintenance shops would be constructed at the Winona, La Crosse, and McGregor districts, and at the Lost Mound Unit. The office would be expanded at the Savanna District and a new shop constructed. Public information and awareness efforts would be increased 50 percent. Staffing levels for the Refuge would increase by 23.5 full-time equivalents over a 15-year period with a balance among biological, maintenance, visitor services, law enforcement, technical, and administrative staff.